

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Bay Delta Fish & Wildlife Office
Species Account
CALIFORNIA LEAST TERN
Sternula antillarum browni

CLASSIFICATION: Endangered (Recommended for downlisting to threatened)

Federal Register 35:16047; October 13, 1970

http://ecos.fws.gov/docs/federal_register/fr27.pdf

CRITICAL HABITAT: Not designated

RECOVERY

See [Spotlight Action Plan](#), September 22, 2009.

(The [Revised California Least Tern Recovery Plan](#), September 27, 1985, is outdated.)

5-YEAR REVIEW: Completed September 2006. Downlisting to threatened recommended.

The species' population increased from 600 in 1973 to roughly 7100 pairs in 2005. The number of California least tern sites has nearly doubled since the time of listing.

http://ecos.fws.gov/docs/five_year_review/doc775.pdf (1933 KB)

DESCRIPTION

The CA Least Tern has a distinctive black cap. It has black stripes running from the cap across the eyes to the beak. These contrast with a white forehead. Other upper parts are gray. Underparts are white. CA Least Terns have short, forked tails. Their bills and legs are orange. When a CA Least Tern is flying, you can see a black wedge on the end of its wings.

As its name implies, the least tern is the smallest of North American terns. It is 21-23 cm (around 8¼ to 9 inches) long. Its wingspan is 48-53 cm (around 19 to 21 inches). They mainly eat small fishes, but also shrimp and sometimes other invertebrates.

Most least terns begin breeding in their third year. Mating begins in April or May. Males perform elaborate aerial displays. After that, they offer fishes to the female. Nesting starts shortly afterwards in colonies on relatively open beaches kept free of vegetation by natural scouring from tidal action. The typical colony is 25 pair. The nest is a simple scrape in the sand or shell fragments. The typical clutch is 2 eggs. Both parents incubate and care for the young.

Predators include larger birds, mammals such as raccoons and foxes, domestic dogs and cats. See our [5-year review](#) (PDF) for a detailed list of predators.

DISTRIBUTION

The Pacific Coast of California, from San Francisco to Baja California. See [5-year review](#) (PDF) for detailed, up-to-date distribution information. See also California Department of Fish & Wildlife [2011 breeding survey](#).



THREATS

Most of the terns rely on degraded habitat on the beaches of densely populated Southern California. Nesting habitat is often separated from the ocean by recreational beach use. Disturbances include a) people and domestic animals walking too close to nests, b) noise pollution from construction or other human activities, c) aircraft flying low or landing in nesting areas, d) military training exercises. See [5-year review](#) (PDF) for information about other threats.

REFERENCES FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

NOTE: There is a special CA least tern species account for 4th, 5th and 6th grade students. See http://www.fws.gov/sacramento/es_kids/CA-Least-Tern/es_kids_ca-least-tern.htm.

California Department of Fish & Wildlife [2011 breeding survey](#).

See 5-year review: http://ecos.fws.gov/docs/five_year_review/doc775.pdf (1933 KB)

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